In 2008, Brad Sciullo traveled from Uniontown to Clearfield—140 miles—to become the first customer at Denny’s Beer Barrel Pub to eat a 20-pound hamburger sandwich in less than five hours. Such appetites may not be unusual in Uniontown, where Jim Delligatti created the Big Mac in 1967. However, decades before Western Pennsylvanians feasted on big burgers, they were enjoying small burgers by the “bagful.” White Tower, an early chain restaurant, was headquartered in Pittsburgh during the 1930s. The company grew rapidly by turning a little burger—a single ounce of meat topped with pickle and tucked inside a two-inch-thick bun—into big business.

The similar-sounding White Castle hamburger chain was launched in Wichita in 1921. As it spread east, the groundbreaking business inspired imitators from White Diamond to White Wonder. Thomas Saxe, founder of the first White Tower in Milwaukee in 1926, audaciously copied White Castle’s formula, from equipment to preparation processes to slogans. It was at this time that the company began expanding, moving its headquarters to Pittsburgh. After Minnesota and Michigan courts found White Tower guilty of trademark infringement in the early 1930s, it was required to change its architecture; Saxe switched to modernist buildings sheathed in porcelain enamel with strips of stainless steel. According to a loving 1979 history of the company, the dazzling look led some to wonder “if Andrew Mellon was behind White Tower.”

White Tower’s popularity surged throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Point Breeze resident Richard Ketchum recalls that after a debutante dance, his prep-school friends headed to a White Tower because its burgers were “the best … for a nickel a piece.” Jeanette native Richard Wissolik lived “pretty well” off the burgers while attending the University of Pittsburgh. The White Tower in Monessen was familiar enough that the United Brethren Church held a rummage sale there in 1944. When Clearfield High School seniors traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1947, they planned to visit “one of the famed White Tower hamburger stands” for a snack. A downtown Pittsburgh White Tower diversified its offerings to serve lunchtime crowds by offering foods appealing to local tastes such as bean, turtle, tomato, and mushroom soups produced by Heinz.

In 1941, the company relocated its headquarters from Pittsburgh to Stamford, Connecticut, but maintained offices and a commissary next to Forbes Field. The move was part of an effort to advance technologically and expand geographically. In 1955, Oil City Blizzard readers learned from syndicated business columnist Sylvia Porter that “the largest hamburger chain in the world” was planning a location in Paris. When the company’s first Tower-O-Matic appeared in Manhattan in 1961, its vending machines and microwave ovens provided even faster food. When the University of Pittsburgh expanded across Forbes Avenue in Oakland, White Tower gave up its offices and commissary to build a new regional headquarters, job training center, and restaurant on an acre of land in East Liberty as part of the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s renewal of that area.

White Tower had once changed the times and then tried to change with the times, but its profitability declined as Americans migrated to suburbs and hunted hamburgers in their automobiles. However, White Tower was attracting more African American customers, who in previous decades had been barred from some stores. Blacks in Detroit referred to locations in the 1920s with discriminatory policies as “dark towers.” A Baltimore outlet inspired a legal challenge to segregation in 1957 but soon after, the 24-hour-a-day restaurant chain was known to “serve everyone,” including people on the margins of society—people whom a McKees Rocks White Tower waitress said did not pretend “to be what they ain’t.”

By the 1980s, those customers were often just sitting with a coffee; the already-tiny restaurants found it hard to stay profitable. White Tower closed the East Liberty commissary in 1980 and ceased operating in Pittsburgh in 1986. Some locations operated independently for a while, but White Tower’s last downtown Pittsburgh franchise, on Sixth Street, closed in 1991. The little white buildings
Left: Later White Tower replaced castle details with streamline modernity; like this one on East Ohio Street, 1985. Photo by Mike May.

Below: Pittsburgh tower #8, at 624 5th Avenue, McKeesport, operated 1931–47, seen here in 1932. Historic photos courtesy T. Brock Saxe, Tombrock Expedition.
fell one by one, and just this past April, the McKees Rocks location was demolished until it now looks like it had never been there.

Sources


This 1941 *Life Magazine* advertisement for Heinz soups shows the variety available at a downtown Pittsburgh White Tower. Other restaurants that served Heinz soups included Philadelphia’s Tom Thumb restaurant, New Orleans’s Valoff’s Luncheonette, and the café at the San Francisco Zoo. Reprinted with permission of H.J. Heinz Company.

White Tower, like other White Castle competitors, emphasized meat quality to win customers. Ron Dylewski collection.
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